



# Developing an Effective Command Philosophy

Lieutenant Colonel Harry C. Garner, U.S. Army, Retired

*The underlying philosophy of leaders has a significant impact on the way they relate to others, attempt to influence others, judge the actions of others, and make decisions affecting others. Most leadership theories, however, neglect this factor.*

— Steven J. Mayer, Ph.D., “Leadership Philosophy”

*Special thanks go to Mark R. Hurley and J. Scott Peterson for their contributions to this article.*

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PHOTO: U.S. Army CPT Evan Davies, right, Apache troop commander, 5th Squadron, 7th Cavalry Regiment, Iraq, talks with a federal police officer during a humanitarian aid delivery in Hadar, Iraq, 17 February 2010. (U.S. Army, SPC Landon Stephenson)

**I**N THE FIELD of military leadership, few concepts provoke as much confusion and misinterpretation as a leadership philosophy. The ritual of every incoming military leader providing his organization some type of “philosophy” document even before the completion of his change of command ceremony endures in Army culture as a symbol of organizational ownership. Who can forget those nights before assuming command, when we anxious young captains fumbled through a file of command philosophies attempting to extract our “philosophy” of leading? In many cases, our efforts were little more than exercises in futility and attempts to fulfill some fictitious expectation. Given the recent high-profile reliefs of command and reported cases of toxic leadership within the Army and Navy, I suspect the level of deep thought and self-analysis many senior leaders give to the preparation of their leadership philosophies is comparable to that of young captains. Field Manual (FM) 6-22, *Army Leadership*, is strangely silent on the concept of a personal leadership philosophy, leaving the reader to wonder what one, in fact, is. Research reveals a variety of articles on the subject, but rarely do any two agree on its purpose, content, or meaning. In most cases, leadership philosophy denotes an organizational philosophy or what the military refers to as “command philosophy.” However, an effective command philosophy is contingent on first developing a personal leadership philosophy.

The U.S. Army Command and General Staff College requires each student to write a personal philosophy of leadership. The learning objective of this exercise is to encourage our mid-level Army leaders to codify their

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thoughts, beliefs, and values about leadership as they prepare for their next leadership challenge. I routinely receive used copies of company-level command philosophies with their focus on unit vision, goals, and objectives. It is obvious to me that most mid-level Army leaders have little time to think about leadership or reflect on those critical life events that shaped their personal values, beliefs, and ethics and how these events impacted their leadership behaviors. I believe the primary reason for this is the failure of the military educational system to clearly define the vague and ambiguous term commonly referred to as “leadership philosophy.” A well thought out leadership philosophy is a critical foundational tool to use to develop influential leaders and create positive organizational climates.

This article examines the power of a properly written leadership philosophy for mid-career leaders. By reflecting on one’s past experience, values, and beliefs, leaders can determine “what they believe” concerning leadership. This discovery and subsequent codification of leadership values and beliefs creates a map that

guides the leader as he attempts to shape a positive organizational climate. Through the application of a personal leadership philosophy as manifested in the organizational command philosophy, the leader imparts his values throughout the organization and affects its moral and operational compass.

All military officers are what John Maxwell refers to as “360-degree leaders” and thus require a viable leadership philosophy.<sup>1</sup> Developing a personal leadership philosophy is essential because, although most military officers are in positions of command for just a brief period, they are in leadership positions for their entire professional careers.

## Defining “Leadership Philosophy”

Professor of philosophy Walter Sinnott-Armstrong argues that—

Some people say philosophy is too abstract and even controversial. Philosophers themselves can’t agree on an answer. Sure, the name “philosophy” means “love of wisdom,” but what’s that? There has been



(U.S. Army, Gopinathan Pillai)

The 335th Signal Command’s guidon is passed from BG James T. Walton to 1LT Toby Crandall at an assumption of command ceremony at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait, 27 February 2010.

a long and glorious history of people called philosophers, but they talk about all kinds of topics in all kinds of ways.<sup>2</sup>

Indeed, a universal definition of philosophy is elusive. One provided by Florida State University's School of Philosophy is revealing. "In a broad sense, philosophy is an activity people undertake when they seek to understand fundamental truths about themselves, the world in which they live, and their relationships to the world and to each other."<sup>3</sup> This definition suggests a philosophy is a very personal self-assessment process during which individuals examine their fundamental beliefs and how they shape their relationships with the world around them.

Philip Pecorino writes in *Just What is Philosophy, Anyway?* that philosophy is "a form of thinking meant to guide action or to prescribe a way of life. The philosophic way of life, if there is one, is displayed in a life in which action is held to be best directed when philosophical reflection has provided direction."<sup>4</sup> Determining one's personal philosophy is a continuous mental practice, a process of constant self-evaluation and the questioning of personal assumptions, beliefs and values, all of which ultimately will result in how we manage individuals and situations we encounter.

Everyone possesses a different philosophy. We possess philosophies concerning religion, art, music, raising kids, investing money, politics, and countless other personal and professional concerns. These philosophies create a collage of how and what we believe concerning various matters based on the values and beliefs we learned, developed, and nurtured through physical, emotional, and physiological growth. These values and beliefs ultimately govern our behaviors with those we lead.

Following this analysis, I endorse George Ambler's definition that a leadership philosophy is—

A set of beliefs, values, and principles that strongly influences how we interpret reality and guide our understanding of influencing humans. It's our philosophy, our understanding, and interpretation of leadership, that affects how we react to people, events, and situations around us.<sup>5</sup>

The way we see ourselves as leaders guides our actions, our behaviors, and our thoughts. It provides the foundation of how we influence others.

In many cases, leaders develop their philosophy through reflection on life's most significant events. Todd Conkright shares this revelation:

I believe I'm a better leader today because my leadership journey has not been easy. It makes me a better listener, increases my sensitivity to those around me, and solidifies my values [and] character. In my experience, the key is intentionally reflecting on those difficult leadership situations so that we actually learn and improve.<sup>6</sup>

Warren Bennis and Robert Thomas call these "significant events" that shape leaders' "crucibles," after the vessels medieval alchemist used in their attempts to turn metals into gold.

The crucible experience was a trial and a test, a point of deep self-reflection that forced them to question who they were and what mattered to them. It required them to examine their values, question their assumptions, hone their judgment. And, invariably, they emerged from the crucible stronger and more sure of themselves and their purpose—changed in some fundamental way.<sup>7</sup>

Crucibles are transformational events. Through crucibles, an individual gains a new or altered sense of identity. These life-altering events might include combat, life-threatening disease, the death of a spouse or child, or a professional or financial crisis such as job loss or bankruptcy. They may also include positive events such as marriage, the birth of a child, or a promotion. Maybe simply growing up on a farm in central Iowa engrained the values of hard work, dedication, and faith into your consciousness. Whatever the crucibles, creating your leadership philosophy means that you must explore and reflect upon your own personal values, assumptions, and beliefs about leadership. Drafting a leadership philosophy codifies the changes in values and beliefs that result from crucibles.

The importance of the self-reflection process is echoed by noted Harvard professor and leadership theorist, Bill George:

Reflection on your life story and your experiences can help you understand them at a deeper level—and so you can reframe your life story in a more coherent way as



your future direction becomes congruent with the knowledge of which you are and the kind of person you want to become.<sup>8</sup>

In an earlier work, *Authentic Leadership: Rediscovering the Secrets of Creating Lasting Value*, George observed:

Leaders are defined by their values and their character. The values of authentic leaders are shaped by personal beliefs, developed through study introspection and consultation with others, and a life time of experiences. These values define the leader's moral compass.<sup>9</sup>

Achieving the level of personal reflection and discovery encouraged by Bennis, Thomas, and George requires a commitment of time and effort. It will not happen quickly. One must turn back the hands of time to search, reminisce, and capture the valuable nuggets of life's rich experiences. The final product of this arduous process—a personal leadership philosophy and the direction it provides—will significantly affect your relationship with those you lead.

## The Value of a Leadership Philosophy

Occasionally, an inquisitive student challenges me with the obvious question, “Why do I need a leadership philosophy? I am in a specialized career-field where my technical expertise and prowess is rewarded. I will rarely, if ever, lead a group of people and if I do, they will be my peers. I’m not a boss; I’m a colleague, and colleagues collaborate.” While this might be wishful thinking on the part of my “specialized” student, the reality is that everyone leads someone. We are not always in charge, but we nonetheless influence the behaviors of those around us by our actions and attitudes. Because every military officer is a leader, but not necessarily a commander, a personal leadership philosophy is a valuable tool to guide actions and attitudes.

John Maxwell's superb book on organizational leadership, *The 360 Degree Leader*, clearly explains the position in which most middle-level military officers find themselves. “The reality,” he writes, “is that 99 percent of all leadership occurs not from the top but from the middle of the organization. Usually, an organization has only one person who is *the leader*.<sup>10</sup>

The 360 degree leader leads up, leads across, and leads down within the organization.

Most officers serve as commanders for only a brief portion of their military career. However, almost all will be leaders when they serve as program managers, project managers, division chiefs and the like, located squarely in the middle of the vast organization known as the U.S. military. A carefully crafted leadership philosophy is equally applicable to the maintenance manager, hospital administrator, finance section chief, or quality control supervisor as it is to the commander. It is an enduring document. You can apply it to any organization you lead now or in the future. It is your foundation and moral guide. Through applying various leadership styles and influencing techniques to different workplace environments and situations, everyone influences or leads someone, whether it is his boss, his peers, or his subordinates.

Equally influential is the office recluse who avoids responsibility and accountability and refuses to commit or buy-in to organizational goals. These contrarian behaviors, whether conscious or unintended, have a negative impact on the organizational climate. This is true for all organizations, not just the military.

## Imparting Your Leadership Philosophy

Given that a military officer is a leader operating in the center of a vast, bureaucratic organization, how does he impart his leadership philosophy to the organization in his charge? A leader's input and

***Because every military officer is a leader...a personal leadership philosophy is a valuable tool to guide actions and attitudes.***



(U.S. Army, SGT Edwin M. Bridges)

**CPT Lillian Woodington, company commander, 3rd Special Troops Battalion, 3rd Brigade Combat Team, 4th Infantry Regiment, 4th Infantry Division, passes out awards to soldiers at Forward Operating Base War Eagle, Baghdad, Iraq, 22 January 2009.**

guidance in a shared organizational (command) philosophy either reinforces or alters the existing organizational values and sets the organizational compass. All organizations have a specific purpose, and most empower their leaders with specific rules and regulations to effectively manage and control the systems that drive the organization. A military command is nothing more than an organization designed to achieve a specific purpose, to fight and win wars. Commanders, the leaders and managers of these war-fighting organizations, are similarly empowered by federal law and regulation with certain powers to execute this unique and dangerous purpose. A failed military operation is potentially devastating in the terms of the loss of human life; so too is an airplane crash or a catastrophic accident deep within a coalmine. Each represents an organizational failure.

While all organizations exist for a unique purpose, humans are the common factor in all

organizations. Leadership, or the ability to influence others, transcends all organizations no matter their purpose. The command philosophy is an organizational philosophy applicable to a military organization. Although there is no prescribed recipe for an organizational philosophy, most agree that it includes the leader's vision for the organization, goals and objectives, and measures of performance.

Some theorists maintain that the quickest way for a newly assigned leader to establish ownership and control of an organization is to immediately distribute an organizational philosophy. A brief examination exposes a fatal flaw to this premise. Barring an extreme crisis jeopardizing the organization's immediate existence and requiring decisive action, the new leader is best advised to exercise patience. In most cases, the new leader is the outsider entering an organization's existing environment and culture and possessing only power conferred through his position or rank. He does not

yet have the personal credibility or institutional knowledge of the organization to direct changes to its goals and objectives. Invoking immediate, broad, and sweeping organizational change only alienates the existing workforce and creates animosity and mistrust of the leader's intentions.

Conducting a detailed assessment of the organization by studying existing reports, after action reviews, inspection results, and other indicators of organizational health is a more appropriate approach. The assessment must include input from superiors, peers, and subordinate leaders within the organization. Subordinate leaders are those who will actually execute recommended adjustments. Inviting the views and opinions of these "change agents" early in the organizational assessment and soliciting their input into organizational improvements help the leader build trust and confidence. The leader begins to impart his personal philosophy of leadership during these private or cooperative gatherings with subordinates.

Imparting values and beliefs can take several forms. First, the leader might provide the group a few "facts" about himself, his beliefs, and values based on his experiences and drawn directly from his personal leadership philosophy. During initial counseling, the leader might give his immediate subordinates a written document outlining his values and beliefs concerning leadership from his personal leadership philosophy. While there is no single doctrinal method to this process, it is wise to provide those trusted with executing the organization's mission a glimpse into your psyche. Transparency goes a long way in building trust and preventing confusion in the future. Harry Christiansen described the results when company commanders fail to have an organizational philosophy:

Have you ever been in a unit where soldiers were unsure of the company commander's expectations and his method of operation? The result is trial and error, second-guessing, and misdirected effort. In short, the organizational leaders spend most of their energy discovering the commander's interest, which distracts from the effectiveness of the unit.<sup>11</sup>

Whatever method of distribution the leader chooses, from the moment the words leave

his mouth or the paper leaves his hand, his subordinates will evaluate and measure his actions against his stated values. In effect, the leader establishes a values-based contract with those he leads.

Once the assessment is completed, organizational leaders begin the shared process of creating a philosophy that is the moral blueprint for the organization. The philosophy includes the organization's vision and the priorities, goals, and objectives to achieve the vision, as well as metrics of performance to assess and track the organization's performance. It is a detailed document representing the array of operating systems and functions found within the organization, all primed and focused on achieving the organization's purpose. It communicates the leader's expectations of others and what they can expect from him. The leader establishes the ethical and moral values of the organization. They come directly from his personal leadership philosophy. As expressed in an article by Joseph Doty and Joe Gelineau, "Leaders also set the command climate by articulating what the core values of the unit are. Core values are those non-negotiable tenets that permeate the unit and guide everything a unit does or fails to do."<sup>12</sup>

In its final form, the organizational philosophy is the foundation for change communicated to all. Those who developed the organizational philosophy, the subordinate leaders, are the chief communicators transmitting the message down to the lowest levels. Subordinate units take ownership of the organizational philosophy and begin positive movement toward the vision.

Through the leader's behaviors and actions, the organization's climate develops and, over time, the unit develops its own unique personality mirroring the values and behaviors of its leader. Good leaders will lead through this transformational, shared philosophy process throughout their careers as different leadership opportunities emerge. Remember, you will be leading someone or some group your entire professional career.

## A Life-long Process

Leadership is a life-long process of self-assessment, learning, application, and reassessment. Developing a personal leadership philosophy requires courage and humility as one attempts to



discover what one truly believes about leadership. Self-reflection is an arduous task, but required to achieve an individual's full leadership potential. This personal written assessment is applicable throughout one's career and is an enduring compass, changing only when life's crucibles force a reassessment of personal values and beliefs. In the field of organizational development, it is a foundational

document. The leader imparts his personal values and beliefs into the organization through a shared organizational and command philosophy. I challenge every officer to draft a personal leadership philosophy. The benefits that you and your organization receive will manifest themselves in efficient, values-based actions as the organization strives toward mission accomplishment. **MR**

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#### NOTES

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